

## Baghdad After the Storm

Despite hardships and lingering violence, residents imagine a new version of the ancient city.

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<http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2011/07/baghdad/addario-photography>

I haven't returned to Baghdad to be a war tourist, attuning my eyes to the many long shadows cast by trauma, but it's difficult not to do just that. The last time I was here I wore desert camouflage and carried an M4



carbine as a sergeant in the U.S. Army's Second Infantry Division. That was in 2003 and 2004, when there were up to 150,000 U.S. troops in Iraq. In the years since, I've often wondered what it must be like for Iraqis struggling to reclaim a life for themselves: the welder, the student, the taxi driver, the old woman, the couple getting married. I've also wondered how it would feel to walk down a Baghdad street without a flak vest and 210 rounds of ball ammunition strapped to my chest.

Back then, my unit escorted long, serpentine supply convoys through the city. Insurgents staged complex ambushes, driving cars loaded down with explosives. The black scorch marks of vehicles burned to the ground remained long after their hulks were removed, giving me pause whenever we passed them by. One day our squad leader yelled at my machine gunner and me to drop down from our positions in the hatches at the rear of our Stryker vehicle—and mortar rounds suddenly burst in the air, raining down a deadly spray of shrapnel. We rode through the storm of metal, hearts pounding in our chests. Memories like these reenact themselves in my mind now as we drive through the city, and for a moment I imagine I've returned to Baghdad the way a ghost might haunt the world it once inhabited.

But things have changed. This isn't the Baghdad I once knew. Just off Abu Nuwas Street near the Tigris River, where sniper fire was once a daily hazard, the sounds of war have been replaced by the

sounds of children playing soccer on the grass. They whoop, high-pitched and full throated, like birds calling to each other. On Haifa Street, where bitter sectarian fighting raged from 2006 to 2008, young men pause in the doorway of a local market to finish a conversation as Iraqi pop music blares from a boombox. Near the university several young women laugh as they cradle textbooks and notebooks, their head scarves a splash of color against the drab building facades. Everywhere around Baghdad there is the sound of a city regaining its voice.

When I stepped off the plane, collected my bag from the luggage belt, and walked out into the city, I didn't know what to expect. It was late December 2010. News reports of targeted assassinations via silencer-equipped pistols occupied my thoughts. I couldn't dismiss the possibility of being kidnapped. But as much as my fear counseled me to jump back on that plane, I wanted to know what had become of this place where I'd once come to war. If I was going to meet the new Baghdad, I'd have to put some old habits and memories to the side.

### **A City of Walls**

My first day back I spread out a map of the city on a table in a shaded inner courtyard. It's an outdated map with many red and blue adhesive dots placed on various parts of the city. Many of the names of neighborhoods have changed since the invasion. Saddam City, as it's listed on my old map, for example, now goes by Sadr City, after the deceased Shiite leader Muhammad al Sadr. The dots create an overall pattern as I step back for a bird's-eye view: blue to one side, red to the other; Shiites dominating the eastern side of the Tigris, Sunnis clustered on the western. The Sunnis have pushed farther west as Shiites have made inroads into neighborhoods adjacent to the river. Although there are still a few mixed neighborhoods, Baghdad is no longer a model secular city of the Middle East, as Iraqis once proudly described it. Years of violence have created a new landscape defined by tribe and religion.

With a population of nearly six million, Baghdad has become a city of walled enclaves regulated by Iraqi Army troops, federal police officers, local policemen, private security guards, and other groups such as the Sons of Iraq, who are like your local Neighborhood Watch crew, only armed with AK-47s. The demarcations are formed by massive concrete blast walls known colloquially as T-walls because they resemble giant T's flipped upside down. Religious flags wave from rooftops, mosques, and intersections in predominately Shiite areas. Sunni neighborhoods are marked by a lack of flags.

"Baghdad is a huge camp, man," says my interpreter, Yousif al-Timimi. "America didn't bring democracy. It brought walls."

### **The River Taxi**

One morning I take a water taxi out onto the Tigris River with a boatman named Ismail, who tells me that he inherited his trade from his father in a tradition stretching back for generations. As he steers the prop with his left hand and talks about his life, I try to push to the back of my mind the fact that we're out in the open, in a clear field of fire, and that a sniper could be in a hide right now debating the physics of his ballistic art—steeped in the contemplation of the elevation and windage, the slight breeze I now feel in my hair, the pitch and yaw of the boat as it slices upriver through the waves, the humidity in the air between us.

And so I focus on the Tigris as it winds its way through the heart of Baghdad. It's a wide river with an unassuming surface of sunlight and shadow, a storied river that doesn't advertise the inexorable pathos transported in its depths. In the winter of A.D. 1258, when the Mongols sacked Baghdad under Hulegu Khan, great destruction was visited upon the city and its inhabitants. The Bayt al Hikma, or House of Wisdom, was plundered, its contents thrown into the Tigris—philosophical tracts and treatises, art, poetry, historical tomes, scientific and mathematical works—the intellectual wealth of centuries. When the Mongols were done pillaging, it's been said, the Tigris ran black with ink.

More recently, it flowed with bodies. In the winter of 2004 soldiers from my battalion manned a johnboat to search an island upriver in the city of Mosul, where a mortar firing position was rumored to be. The boat capsized, and weighed down by their equipment, one soldier and three Iraqi policemen disappeared into the water. My company helped cordon off the riverbanks so that patrol boats and Navy divers could recover their bodies. Before they could find them, the search teams pulled up the bodies of a student from Kirkuk and an Iraqi policeman we weren't even looking for. As I sit in Ismail's water taxi, I'm hesitant to reach over and put my hand into the water. The Tigris has become a kind of graveyard; it deserves respect.

I take a series of photographs. Iraqi Army soldiers materialize from their posts under the bridge abutments and order us to shore. We're briefly detained and questioned by the local commander, who stands in the doorway of a guard shack wearing only a bemused expression and thermal underwear, his combat boots left unlaced, a tiny cup of Arabic coffee in his hand. He orders us not to take any more pictures of the bridges and then releases us. Before we can go, one of the soldiers insists I share from his plate of scrambled eggs. He tears his flatbread in two and shoves a piece into my hands with a smile.

Back out on the Tigris, Ismail tells me there was an incident last week involving a magnetic "sticky" bomb, and that it may also have involved a water taxi. The Iraqi military keeps a vigilant eye on the river. Which makes me wonder how Ismail is able to make a living under such conditions. When were the good times? I ask.

Ismail responds, "Good times?"

## **Al Mutanabbi Street**

A small bird roosts in a cage just outside the door of the Shahbandar café on Al Mutanabbi Street, where poets and philosophers refuse the chessboard for the stimulant of engaging conversation, debate, and intellectual inquiry. As I take a seat beside Mohammed Jawad, a 63-year-old biology professor, I can't help but notice the framed photos of those who died in a 2007 bombing that killed dozens inside and outside the coffee shop. When I ask him about the attack, Jawad says, "The bombings are like the rings on a tree. What do you call them? The growth rings?" I nod as he continues. "Trees experience fire and times of no water. It's a matter of periods. The growth rings show us the good times and the bad times. These are the bad times now, but it's all a part of the growth of the tree." He pauses, sips his chai. "Let me tell you, history is manufactured by war."

Later, as I walk down Al Mutanabbi Street, where tables are stacked with poetry collections and textbooks for sale, I notice the many short, hard glances I'm getting from those going about their business. It's Saturday, around noon, and the street is busy but not packed. Although I hadn't noticed it at first, something inside of me has clicked back into place. I catch myself turning in slow, smooth circles as I walk—I'm scanning the scene behind me to determine if there are any threats. It's a habit I've mostly broken back home in the States. I try to look casual, as if I'm merely curious about the books I've just passed, but in fact I've instinctively reverted back to my days on foot patrol. Whom do I discover trailing me? A poet, who simply wanted to resume a conversation we'd started in the café.

"Of course, I'm a poet," he says. "What else can you do but write poetry in a country like this?"

In Firdos Square the ghost of Saddam Hussein hovers over the pedestal where a statue of him was famously pulled down. So many people here will tell you that although they may have wished for Saddam's removal from power, they miss the grand vision in which the difficult seemed possible during his reign. After one of the bridges over the Tigris was bombed during the 1991 air campaign of the Gulf War, for example, Saddam vowed that the bridge would be operational within one month. It was an audacious deadline that locals say the construction crews succeeded in meeting. In contrast, the Saddam mosque at the center of the city remains unfinished after more than a decade. Massive concrete columns and rebar rise to impressive heights, while the domes they're meant to support exist only in the architect's blueprints. It was envisioned to be the largest mosque in the Middle East but stands now as a mere sketch of greatness.

## **The Private Club**

Tonight I find myself smoking a *sheesha*, or hookah, loaded up with mint-flavored tobacco, at Al Alawiyah Club near Firdos Square. Swanky. Once past a maze of blast walls and bored security personnel, I sit in a large gazebo near a water fountain lit by blue filtered lights. A well-dressed and sober-faced man smokes his own sheesha two tables over. According to gossip, he's an Iraqi Army general who would rather smoke alone than go home to his wife. I'm told this by Rawaa al-Neaami, the businesswoman who invited me to the club.

Al-Neaami wears jeans tucked into black leather boots, a frilly blouse, and huge earrings. Her hair is cut short and dyed a mixture of colors, mostly reddish hues. She's started a nongovernmental organization in Baghdad to empower young adults. Classes at her school include yoga, dramatic dance, filmmaking, graphic design, and creative writing. "I believe, as a human being, not just as an Iraqi woman, that these skills have a major role in developing students. In fact, they are the soul of our life," she says. "This is the real jihad. The real jihad doesn't mean I have to carry a weapon and kill."

Her latest project, she tells me, involves going into juvenile detention centers in Baghdad to encourage young people through art. She's been surprised by those she's discovered there. The inmates range in age from 5 to 18 years old. Many are simply orphans created by the years of sectarian violence. She plans to film a documentary to tell their stories.

## **The Barbershop**

One evening I decide to get a haircut on Al Karradah Street. When I was here as a soldier, three of us once left an abandoned house where we'd set up an observation post to buy a block of ice from a delivery truck. It was August, and we didn't spot a truck. But on the way back to the house we passed a barbershop, and I mentioned that I could use a haircut.

"You want to get a haircut?" my squad leader asked.

"Sure."

I don't know what any of us were thinking, because the security situation in 2004 made sitting in a barbershop with a plate glass window ludicrous. Still, I went inside while my squad leader and grenadier pulled watch out on the sidewalk. The only other customer was an out-of-work university professor who spoke excellent English. I propped up my weapon within arm's reach, sat down, and had an amiable conversation with the good professor while the barber worked his trade. So I guess I got what I was really after, a sense of normalcy.

Congenial as our talk was, running through the back of my mind was a wide variety of dangerous scenarios. The plate glass window facing the street was an invitation for all of us to make a small-print, page-18 news column back home. When the barber scraped the bristled hairs on the back of my neck with the flattened edge of a straight razor, I felt alert to every nuance possible within the moment. A subdued but crackling tension seemed to fill the air.

I now sit in a brightly lit and busy barbershop. The atmosphere is relaxed, even cheerful. It's after sundown, and outside, a man with a pushcart kitchen slices thin cuts of meat from a rotisserie for *shawarma*, or flatbread sandwiches. Redolent smoke drifts along the crowded sidewalk. Inside the barbershop, mirrors in front of and behind us create an illusion of multitudes. As the hair falls to the floor below, I'm acutely aware that for some of those present, I'm beginning to look more and more like the soldier I once was.

### **The New Baghdad**

Before leaving Baghdad, I stop in Al Karradah district to buy an Iraqi-made hookah to take back home. Jaywalking through early evening traffic, I notice how energetic street life is. Shop doors are propped open. Upscale fashion retailers feature the latest clothing lines on headless mannequins in glass-front displays. Toy stores, hardware stores, cell phone shops, local grocers—there's a bustle and vibrancy of activity not only among the street vendors but also among the established merchants.

Even so, only yesterday a mortar crew attacked a Shiite gathering in Baghdad, wounding five. A bomb exploded near a mosque in Al Utayfiyah district, injuring three. In Mosul a woman's body was left in the street. When I speak with people here, I recognize years and years of frustration in their voices. And yet, as I look around city neighborhoods, beyond the T-walls and the Hueys patrolling overhead, I also see signs of renewal and growth.

Something has changed within me as well. With each passing day, the adrenaline that accompanied my return to the city has subsided. I can see more clearly now that Baghdad is becoming a new version of itself—not a place defined by war, where journalists and the addicts of danger ply their trades, but a more livable, thriving place. Although it will certainly take time, and the aftermath of war will leave an indelible signature here for the rest of our lives, Baghdad has begun to reimagine itself as a majestic city once more.